



TALES OF NEWFOUNDLAND ♦

The Old Hag

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland tale is one you may know in your own bones, even if you have never heard its name. Because on the Rock, they have a name for a terror that visits people all over the world in the dead of night, and once you have heard it, you will never forget it, and you may find yourself glancing at the dark corner of your own bedroom tonight. They call it the Old Hag.



CAROL

The Old Hag. Marty, just the name of it puts a shiver in me. What is she?



MARTY

Here is how it comes, Carol. You are asleep in your bed in the night. And you wake, or you seem to wake, and at once you know something is terribly wrong. Because you cannot move. Not a finger, not your head, nothing. You are pinned, wide awake, aware of your own room, unable to stir or cry out. And then, Carol, comes the worst of it. You feel a weight settle onto your chest. A crushing, pressing weight, growing heavier, until you can barely breathe. And you become certain, with a dread beyond all reason, that there is someone in the room with you. And you look, and sitting on your chest, holding you down, is a hideous old woman, a hag, glaring into your face.



CAROL

Oh, Marty. Stop. That is horrifying. Awake, unable to move, and a witch sitting on your chest crushing the breath out of you. I have goosebumps up both arms. Does she, does she do anything?



MARTY

She holds you, Carol. She presses down and steals your breath and fills you with a terror you cannot describe, and you strain with everything you have to move, to scream, to break free, and you cannot, and it seems to go on and on. And then, at last, something gives, you jerk awake for real, your body suddenly your own again, your heart slamming, and you sit up gasping in the dark, drenched in sweat, and she is gone. On the Rock they have a phrase for it, Carol, plain and chilling. They say the Old Hag was on you. Or simply, you were hagged.



CAROL

You were hagged. Marty, and this happens to real people, not just in a story? This is a real thing on the island?



MARTY

It is very real, Carol, and this is what makes the Old Hag so remarkable. This is not a spooky tale someone dreamed up. It is a genuine folk belief, so common and so consistent in Newfoundland that a scholar named David Hufford went there and studied it, and wrote a whole book about the terror that comes in the night. Because all over the world, and all through history, ordinary people have had this exact experience, the waking, the paralysis, the crushing weight, the sense of a presence, the figure on the chest. Every culture has a name for it. And on the Rock, the name is the Old Hag.



CAROL

So it is universal. Marty, that almost makes it more frightening, not less, that the same hag visits people everywhere. Is there a, well, is there an explanation?



MARTY

There is, Carol, and I will give it to you honestly, because I think the truth here is as fascinating as the folklore. What the science says is that this is a thing called sleep paralysis. As we drift in and out of the deepest dreaming sleep, the body naturally paralyzes itself, so that we do not act out our dreams. And sometimes the mind wakes up before the body's paralysis lets go. So you are conscious, aware of your room, but your body is still switched off, and you cannot move. And the dreaming part of the brain, still half-running, fills that helpless, frightening moment with the most primal thing it can conjure, a threatening presence, a weight, a figure. The Old Hag, Carol, is your own sleeping mind, caught between two worlds.



CAROL

Your own mind, caught between sleep and waking. Marty, that is extraordinary. So there is no witch at all. And yet, and yet, that does not make it feel any less real when it happens, does it.

MARTY

Not one bit, Carol, and that is the wisdom hiding in the folklore. Because here is the thing. Knowing it is sleep paralysis does not stop the terror. People who understand the science perfectly well still wake up hagged, still feel the weight, still see the figure, still cannot move, and are still frightened out of their wits. The experience is completely real, whatever we call it. And so I have a deep respect, Carol, for the old Newfoundland folk who did not have the science, but who had something almost as good. They had a name for it, and a shared understanding, and even a set of remedies.

CAROL

Remedies, Marty? What did they do to keep the Old Hag away?

MARTY

All manner of things, Carol, passed down through the outports. Some slept with a nail or a knife or a bit of iron under the pillow, for the old folk believed iron

warded off evil. Some placed their boots by the bed pointing away from them, or a board with a nail driven through it. Some said their prayers with special care. And there was a darker piece of it too, Carol, for it was believed that a person could send the Old Hag onto an enemy, could call her down on someone they wished ill, by saying the Lord's Prayer backward. So the hag was not only a terror of the night. She was, in the old belief, a weapon that a bitter neighbour might turn on you.

CAROL

A neighbour could send the hag on you. Oh, Marty, that is the folklore turning properly sinister. So which is it, in the end, the science or the witch?

MARTY

It is both, Carol, and that is exactly why I love this one. The science tells us what is happening in the sleeping brain, and it is true. But the folklore tells us what it feels like, and that is true too, truer in its way, because the feeling is the real thing, the ancient primal terror of being helpless in the dark with something pressing down. Our ancestors, on the Rock and everywhere, met that terror the only way people can meet a thing they cannot escape. They named it, they shared it, and they laughed at it a little in the daylight, and passed the name to their children, so no one would ever have to wake up alone and think they were the only one. The Old Hag is the whole human race, Carol, keeping each other company in the dark. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am putting my boots by the bed pointing at the door, just in case. Hold your people close, keep a light near, and if the Old Hag comes calling, remember she has visited everyone who ever lived. Come back to the fire.